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ABSTRACT

This study focuses on the motivational aspects of children's humor and describes the naturally occurring verbal humor of children without stimulus from adults. Kindergarten and elementary school children were observed during their lunch period at school while engaged in social interaction over 16 weeks. The study was designed to (1) record the types and frequencies of humor that appeared at each age level, and (2) determine the extent to which the emotional tone of the day affected humor production or reproduction. The findings of the study supported the developmental stages of humor outlined by Paul McGhee (1971). In all forms of humor, boys were the initiators and girls the responders. Girls were eager to laugh at boys' antics and jokes, while boys did not respond to girls' attempts to be funny. Very little hostile humor was found. Hostile humor occurred among boys after teasing was initiated by a boy, and a girl teased in return. More humor was recorded on days classified as high or medium in emotional tone (days when children would not settle down, or normal days) than on days classified as low in tone (quiet days with little interaction). Children in kindergarten and first grade engaged in more teasing and silliness than other children. (Author/SS)

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Humor and the Primary Child

by Lillian Canzler

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Boys use more hostile humor than girls, but the overall use of hostile humor in primary children is very low. Children at ages five through eight are more apt to participate in silliness, good-natured teasing, and story-telling than in ridicule or defiance.

These are among the findings of a study recently conducted at the Washington Center for Early Childhood Education at Central Washington University, Ellensburg, Washington. The study was funded by the University's Faculty Research Fund.

Paul McGhee's definition of humor and his stages of humor development are important to the understanding of humor in this study. McGhee defines humor as having two essential characteristics, " (1) It is a form of intellectual play and for the child this means playful consideration in fantasy of events or relationships known to be impossible or improbable, (2) It is founded on a base of incongruity." [1]

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[1] Paul E. McGhee, Humor: Its Origin and Development. San Francisco: Freeman, 1979. pp. 42-43.

We are largely indebted to the Swiss psychologist, Jean Piaget for observations leading to understandings of how humor develops[2] Building from Piaget's work, Paul McGhee records four stages of humor development as follows:

Stage 1. Incongruous Actions toward Objects.

> Somewhere in the second year, the child begins to retain images of objects, that is a child may treat an image of a toy as if it were that toy, being fully aware of the difference between the two. Given a playful mode of behavior, the child may knowingly juxtapose this image in a manner that is incongruous with its normal use or state.

Stage 2. Incongruous Labeling of Objects and Events

> At this stage there is an inconsistency between the label and the real object. For example, a child holds a banana to his ear and says, "Hello. I'm so glad you called." At this stage there is less emphasis on action and more on verbal ability.

Stage 3. Conceptual Incongruity

> Around the age of three the child seems to be capable of seeing varying degrees of incongruity due to abilities to understand classes of objects. This stage is also characterized by language play with rhyming words such as, "poopy, doopy, loopy".

Stage 4. Multiple Meanings, or the First Step Toward Adult Humor

> Somewhere around 6.5 and 7.0 years of age the child becomes capable of at least 3 types of interpretive explanations, including (1) pulling together and contrasting the incongruous elements of the situation, (2) comparing the incongruous situation with the normal or expected one, and (3) giving a motivational interpretation of some character of the cartoon or joke.[3] At this stage the child no longer "centers" on one aspect of a story or event, but is able to keep more than one meaning of a word in his mind at the same time and can play with both until the double meanings of riddles and puns become clear.

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[2]Jean Piaget, Play, Dreams, and Imitation in Childhood. New York: Norton, 1962.

[3]P.E. McGhee."Cognitive Development and Children's Comprehension of Humor." Child Development, 1971, 42, 123-138.

At stage 4 children genuinely love riddles and puns and parents and teachers are constantly bombarded with them usually followed by the question, "Get it? It's a joke." (For a study of children's riddling, John Holmes McDowell's Children's Riddling. Undiana University Press, 1979, is essential).

While psychologists and educators have studied humor in a variety of ways, this study focuses on the motivational aspects of humor and is a description of children's natural verbal humor, i.e., without humor stimulus from adults in the form of adults telling jokes, teasing, or reading riddles. The motivation for these humor expressions comes from peers and perhaps from the relaxed atmosphere. The children were observed during their lunch period. Using the humor categories established by Alice Groch and others (see table 1), children observed in a social interaction situation only over a 16-week period.[4] They were not observed during academic work periods.

The study was designed (1) to record the types and frequencies of humor that appeared at each age-level, and (2) to determine the extent to which the emotional tone of the day effected humor production or reproduction.

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[4] Alice Groch, "Joking and Appreciation of Humor in Nursery SChool Children," Child Development. 45 (1974), 1098-1102.

Table 1
Definitions and Examples of Humor Types

Type	Example
REPRODUCTIVE:	
Story/song	Rembered story, must be in complete form to be recorded. Example: " Birdie, birdie in the sky, drop a turdie in my eye. It's a good thing cows can't fly, they could really hurt a guy."
Riddles	Remembered riddle in complete form. Example:"What did the pink panther say when he stepped on an ant? Dead ant, dead ant, dead ant, ant, ant."
RESPONSIVE:[a]	
Events	Discovery of incongruous, funny, or surprising objects and occurrences. Example: finding a "baby peanut" in a shell; discovering the girl's tights were the same color as her teacher's.
People	Behavior of other's viewed as amusing. Includes intentional jesting and ineptness. Example: someone falling over a chair.
Statements	Verbal joking, response to words or ideas of another person. Example: Adult: "What is it--a roast turkey (clay object)?" Child: giggles.
Story/song	Humor in the verbal or pictorial content of books, songs, and records.
PRODUCTIVE:[a]	
Silliness/ clowning	Funny gestures and play which reveals self in a comical manner. Aims to amuse, not offend. Example: Boy puts empty pitcher in his mouth and grunts.
Teasing	Provoking others through words or gestures. Example: sneaking up behind someone and whistling.
Word & food play	Humorous delight in sounds and word combinations. Example: "I went to Disneyland. I saw Goofy and he goofed me."
Absurd	Creation of what is physically, logically, or socially incongruous or impossible. Example: "My fish is taking a shower (smile)."
Displacement	Humor intended to minimize injury to self-esteem. Example: Child accidentally trips and then laughs. (Successfully takes attention away from his/her earlier behavior which may have been as embarrassing.)
HOSTILE:[a]	
Ridicule	Making fun of someone, especially through name calling. Example: "Peter is a dummy!"

[a]Developed by Groch, 1974, p. 1099.

Within this larger framework I pursued the following questions:

(1) Do older children enjoy a wider selection of humor forms?

(2) Do boys initiate more humor than girls?

(3) Do girls respond more than initiate?

(4) Do children use a lot of hostile humor?

(5) Does the emotional tone of the day effect humor development?

The findings of this study supported the stages of development theory. Kindergarten and first grade children are lovers of teasing and silliness. Somewhere around the age of seven children shift from teasing and silliness to re-telling stories and riddles that they have heard at home, camp, or school. Children younger than seven are aware that these forms exist, but have not completely mastered the form. However they do seem to be working toward mastery of the form itself and seem to love the poetic quality of the phrases. For example, one kindergarten child tried to tell this knock-knock joke to an adult while several peers were listening.

C. Knock Knock.

A. Who's There?

C. Banana (Child cracks up with laughter. Other children join in "Get it? Bannana, Banana, Banana-nana.")

The teacher is left wondering, "What is so funny?"

A stage 4 version of the joke goes like this:

Knock-Knock---Who's there?

Banana--- Banana Who?

Knock-Knock---Who's there?

Banana---Banana who?

Knock-Knock---Who's There?

Banana---Banana who?

Knock-Knock---Who's there?

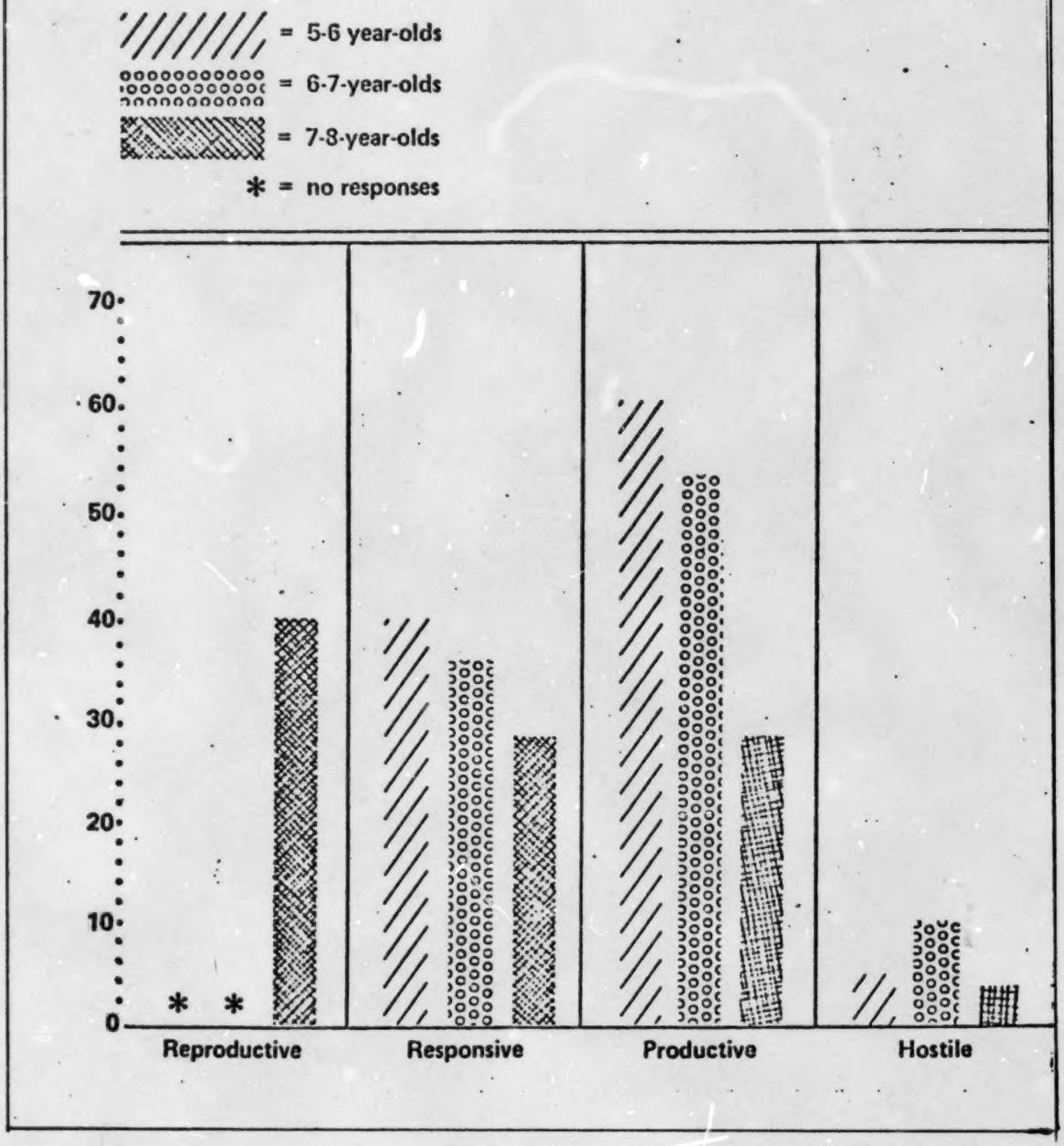
Orange---Orange Who?

"Orange you glad I didn't say banana?"

In all forms of humor--productive teasing and silliness; hostile; and reproductive story-telling--boys are the initiators and girls are the responders. There seems to be an understanding among boys that if a girl tells the story, it isn't funny. Girls on the other hand seem to be eager to laugh at the boys' stories and at the boys' antics. New boys in the classroom might be treated like girls until they are accepted, that is, the other goys do not laugh at their humorous antics or riddles.

Very little hostile humor is used by children at the primary-age. Boys are slightly more hostile than girls. In the episodes recorded, hostile humor

Graph 1
Percentage of Humor Type by Groups



developed after teasing was initiated by a boy, and a girl teased in return. The boys who were eager to tease did not like to be teased in return and responded with ridicule and name-calling.

A careful record was kept of the emotional-tone of each day as determined by teacher judgments. Emotional-tone had three classifications: high, medium, and low. High emotional tone was a day when children would not settle down; medium emotional tone was a normal day; and low days held very little interaction between children and a general tendency toward quietness was evident. More humor was found on days recorded as high or medium. Very little humor was recorded on low-emotional tone days.

During all days, children in kindergarten and first grade produced more teasing and silliness. Fives averaged four episodes per half-hour; sixes averaged 1.5 episodes per half-hour compared with.4 episodes per half-hour in seven and eight-year old children. Only seven and eight-year-olds reproduced riddles and stories. At this age some songs were reproduced that only children knew, songs that were totally unfamiliar to the teacher, yet every child knew every word. Clearly a kind of under-ground humor-teaching existed. When children do share their special folklore it is only to adults who have proven to be trustworthy, that is, they will not tell principals, parents, or punish or chide.

The findings of this study would seem to merit continued study and consideration of the following concerns: Teachers may want to (1) watch for the child who is a responder to events and to people as well as for the child who is distracted by the presence of others, (2) chart the emotional levels of their days to see if they have too many high days or too many low days, (3) look at more than one reason for having an educational program. McGhee reports that, "The exertion of large amounts of effort in an attempt to master fine motor skills is incompatible with the development of humor, that is, children who are very persistent and work hard at perfecting skills and reproducing high quality subsequently make fewer attempts to initiate humor and laugh less than their less achievement-oriented peers."[5] Teachers may want to plan for more humor and for more social exchange, particularly at those times when it does not interfere with academic development. Looking at humor could heighten awareness of affective development.

In addition, I believe that fantasy play in blocks, creative drama, and social studies could continue through the second grade instead of ending in kindergarten since fantasy play is a prerequisite to humor development.

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[5]Paul E. McGhee. Humor: Its Origin and Development San Francisco: Freeman, 1979, pp. 220-221.

As educators we need to know more about boys and their learning styles. Some humor studies have shown that inactive boys show more hostility in their humor than active boys. In this study, boys were active which might be one reason for the low levels of hostile humor.

Teachers during their teacher training might watch to see if they can tolerate the humor of the five and six-year-olds or if they are more in tune with the humor of the older children. A mis-match could make their teaching career unbearable. Also their influence on the child's humor development could be negative.

Girls may need to be encouraged to be initiators of humor, not just responders. Teachers could build into their group-sharing times opportunities for girls to tell riddles and stories.

Administrators may need to decrease the amount of time that a teacher of fives and sixes spends with children as their intense use of silliness adds to the stress already high at this teaching-level (stress due to parent and child concerns about reading and math).

Teachers of fives and sixes could capitalize on children's love of silliness and teasing as they select music and poetry. For example, children love to sing, "I Love Trash", and "I'm Being Swallowed by a Boa Constrictor."

As was mentioned by a psychologist in 1902, "It might be wise for the suffering teacher to encourage the jacose urchins for upon them mainly depends that source of humor which we need to irradiate our solemn old earth."[6]

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[6] K. A. Chandler, "The Sense of Humor in Children," Century 42 (1902)pp 959-960.